

Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics

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The cover of Jeremy Gilbert's book is attractive and ironic at the same time, but not necessarily with intent. It shows Warhol-style pop art portraits of Ché Guevara in three different colours, 'interrupted' by one of George W. Bush. Together with the book's title and subtitle, this sets up a series of contradictions that are never quite resolved. Part of the reason for this is the fundamental tension between being 'anticapitalist' within a capitalist system, and a similar tension between *radical* theory and *popular* politics. In other words, do *radical* and *popular* not count each other out? Of course, as Gilbert rightly identifies, this has been a problem for the New Left since its inception, and this tension has therefore been an integral part of the 'radical tradition' of cultural studies. Overall then, this book argues that the identified radical tradition (at least theoretically) of cultural studies, and the new political movements which try to resist corporate globalisation, need each other and could potentially be very happy bedfellows: "whilst theory can shape and direct the huge diversity of anticapitalist activism, the energy and sheer political engagement of the anticapitalist movement can breathe new life into cultural studies". This would indeed kill two birds with one stone, as it would simultaneously counter the 'fragmented rag tag' image of the anticapitalist movement, and the increasingly common perception of cultural studies as politically ineffectual. As Gilbert notes in the introduction, "both have their intellectual and spiritual roots in the radical movements of the twentieth century, they both tend to be informed by egalitarian, pluralist and libertarian critiques of contemporary societies, and they are both interested in the multifarious forms of contemporary and historical power relationships" (p. 1). Although foreshadowed in these pages but not specifically addressed, the book gets a powerful retrospective shot in the arm from the still unravelling global financial crisis (GFC: yes, it has its own acronym!) and the corporate excesses that contributed to it, if not created it.

Overall then, the aim of this book is an important one. However, the way Gilbert has organised the material has an odd jarring effect at times, and does not always flow as well as it might have. This is partly due to the apparent disconnect in places between theory and cultural history. On the face of it, the book's organisation appears to follow a logical trajectory. It attempts to deliver a history of cultural studies (Chapter 1 and 2), and a cultural history of the anti-capitalist movement (Chapter 3), before turning to theory to establish the links between capitalism and culture (Chapter 4), and then to more abstract theory to further develop those links and to consider their implications for political change, or lack thereof (Chapter 5). This is then followed by a 'case study' of the contemporary UK context, where some of the theory is tested. The final chapter before the conclusion (Chapter 7) is perhaps the most promising, in that it does what cultural studies arguably does best: it analyses, deconstructs and critiques contemporary anti-capitalism *as a culture*, and interestingly, it identifies that culture itself (which Gilbert calls 'the activist imaginary') as the main obstacle to its success. "Put simply, 'the activist

imaginary' is an attitude which makes a fetish of the so-called outsider status of activists: this attitude prevents activists from really engaging in the kind of real politics which might produce real change (because real change would ultimately threaten the outsider status of activists)" (p. 3). In other words, 'the activist imaginary' prevents its anti-capitalist agenda from making connections beyond its own 'sub-cultural' boundaries, because it rejects the possibility of partisans of anti-capitalism, who would not be full-time activists, but who would nevertheless support the cause. This is of course hardly a revolutionary idea, and in fact it has clear echoes of the split between the professional revolutionary elite and the ordinary masses within Leninist theory, as Gilbert rightly points out. "Those movements which change things invariably do so by winning large-scale support amongst a diverse public, not all of whom *can* be full-time activists" (p. 233). It is at this point as well that the book makes a real attempt at forging an explicit link between its theoretical chapters, based in cultural studies, and its political agenda. This is where the extensive discussions, especially in Chapter 5, about the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Laclau and Mouffe, and Hardt and Negri, and the influence of Gramsci, come to the fore, and it is here that the book could really use a knock-out punch to deliver on its promise of showing how cultural studies theory can be applied to effect real political change, but unfortunately it stops short, in what seems like a curious 'cop-out' which is uncharacteristic of the rest of the book.

Indeed, the book critiques other authors throughout its pages for not being sufficiently clear on how to turn theory and cultural critique into political action with real outcomes. For example, in his critique of Richard Day's *Gramsci is Dead*, Gilbert (drawing on de Certeau) accuses Day of wanting "a politics in which the question of *strategy*, the question of *how you persuade others to agree with you*, is simply occluded" (p. 219, original emphasis). A similar critique is levelled at others, especially and repeatedly at Naomi Klein (!), in various parts of the book. In light of such valid critiques however, it is rather disappointing when Gilbert ultimately finishes his own arguments by shifting the responsibility for political change unto others, thereby paradoxically doing precisely what he has identified as problem with cultural studies. First, he notes the success of the diffusion of feminist, anti-racist, and green ideas, and argues that such success can be attributed to "the rhizomatic process of cultural dissemination, rather than on the recruitment of ever-larger numbers to the ranks of activist militancy" (p. 233), drawing on Deleuze and Guattari and on Gramsci. This then appears to invite an outline of a strategy of how such a rhizomatic process could be applied to effect political change in support of the anti-capitalist agenda, and thus answer the central question of the book. Instead however, Gilbert finishes as follows: "How exactly this might happen today is not a question I could answer without lapsing into prescriptive dogma. Let these remarks stand rather as an invitation to artists, philosophers, journalists, media critics, students, teachers, political inactivists and anyone else who's interested" (p. 233). In short, after spending most of his book arguing for a more strategic approach to effect political change and to get beyond neo-liberal hegemony, it is now business as usual and back to the status quo? It is now up to others to come up with whatever they think should be done? This is hardly the call to arms one would expect to come out of the energy of the preceding pages. This makes the book ultimately rather disappointing, because it means

that it fails to pick up on the radical potential for which Gilbert has historically admired cultural studies.

The above critique of the book is borne out of disappointment with an ultimately undelivered promise, and should be read in that spirit. At the same time, the book has a lot to offer. For those new to cultural studies, it offers a clear historical overview of the genesis and importance of cultural studies, even if this is available elsewhere. However, where the book really delivers is in the chapters that discuss some of the most influential theoretical paradigms associated with cultural studies, from Gramsci to Hardt and Negri with a bit of Žižek thrown in for good measure. Those chapters provide thought provoking discussions, and more importantly they create potentially productive linkages between various theoretical paradigms; and it helps here that Gilbert writes in a highly accessible style. There are other smaller critical points to be made, for example about the rather Anglo-Saxon perspective on an apparently 'global' anti-capitalist movement, which Gilbert acknowledges rather than justifies. But overall, this book makes for a stimulating read for anyone disillusioned by years of neoliberal hegemony and anyone who is interested in the role that cultural studies can (or perhaps should) play in effecting real political change.

References

Day, R. J. F. (2005). *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*. London: Pluto.